

Something for Everyone? A Content Analysis of Provincial Library Association Conference Sessions

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Keywords

Library conferences, conference programs, content analysis, library sectors

Abstract

Objective

To determine the breakdown of provincial library association conference sessions by the following categories: library sector, library group, and topic.

Methods

A content analysis of five years worth of conference sessions from three western Canadian provinces, British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan, using an evidence based library and information practice framework.

Results

287 out of the 551 total sessions over the five years analyzed targeted all library sectors. 194 sessions targeted public libraries, 70 focused on school libraries, 66 were for academic libraries, and 7 specifically targeted special libraries. 201 out of the 551 total sessions could be of interest to all groups; 334 were of particular interest to librarians; 122 were targeted towards library technicians, 54 sessions targeted library workers; and 89 sessions were specifically for trustees. Management was the most popular session topic, followed by Culture, Information Access and Retrieval, Collections, Professional Issues, Programming, Reference, and Education.

Conclusions

Although public library sessions did indeed dominate, when individual sectors were examined, sessions appropriate for every library sector outnumbered everything else. The majority of sessions were of particular interest to librarians, and Management was the most popular session topic.

Introduction

An anecdotal remark sparked this research project. Someone said, via someone else, that they never go to *Conference X* because all it has is public library content. This was not the first time a comment like this had been heard. People tend to have certain perceptions of conferences based on their own experiences and on what they have

heard from others. Such perceptions, combined with how fast and far they can travel, may have a detrimental impact on conference attendance, especially if the perceptions are not the reality. Did the content offerings of *Conference X* really tend to focus on the public library sector? Finding no hard evidence to back up this comment, the author decided to engage in evidence based library and information practice and find the evidence. This investigation started with the assumption that all provincial library conferences strive to have a variety of sessions to appeal to a variety of library sectors and groups.

Data were collected from three Canadian provinces: British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. Conference programs from the provincial library association conferences were obtained and a content analysis was performed on the conference sessions.

Evidence Based Library and Information Practice: An Overview

Evidence based library and information practice, or EBLIP, is a process by which the best available evidence is used to inform decision-making and to enhance library practice. EBLIP involves five steps:

1. Formulate a question: It is important to be precise here, as formulating an answerable question is the way to focus on the issue that needs to be resolved or informed.
2. Find the evidence: Both qualitative and quantitative research evidence is acceptable. The idea is to find the best available evidence. The published research evidence should be combined with practical experience and local context in order for it to be workable in the current situation.
3. Appraise the evidence: The research evidence must be critically appraised to determine its relevance, validity and reliability. This can sound daunting, but there are many critical appraisal checklists available to help sort through the research evidence.
4. Apply the evidence: Determining if research evidence is applicable to your situation is the next step. It would be very lucky to find a study that can be directly applied to your situation. More often than not, the research evidence may need to be locally validated, or it will serve to inform your knowledge of the situation rather than being directly applicable. If no published evidence can be found, the practitioner should consider mounting a research study to determine the measures to take.
5. Evaluate the results: The EBLIP process should be evaluated on two fronts: how the practitioner carried out the steps for EBLIP and if the applied evidence served to make the difference that was anticipated.

Another part of EBLIP involves disseminating the results. This can be done in a formal publication or presentation, or more informally by personal communication, listservs, continuing education, policy, etc. (Wilson and Hall).

Literature Review

Three major Library and Information Studies databases were searched in an attempt to discern whether research has been conducted in the area of conference programming. LISA: Library and Information Science Abstracts; Library Literature & Information Science Full Text & Retrospective; and Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts were searched using a variety of search strings. Searches included *conferences AND content analysis*, *conferences AND evaluation OR appraisal OR comparative studies OR research*, *content analysis AND conference proceedings*, and other permutations along the same lines. The search results were minimal in number, as not much work has been done in this vein.

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) conferences seem to be the focus of much of the work being done in the area of library conference analysis. Such analyses included: analysis of scholarly communication among academic librarians using a bibliometric analysis of ACRL conference proceedings (Buchanan, Goedecken, and Herubel); determining the research content of ACRL conference papers, which found that 33.3% of the 66 submitted papers studied could be defined as research, while the remainder were descriptive case studies (Coughlin and Snelson); presenter profiles (Fennewald); what happens to ACRL conference presentations--are they published or not, which found that 18% of papers and panels are published, while only 8% of posters and round tables are published (Fennewald); the representation of technical services topics, which began with the hypothesis that these topics are under-represented at the ACRL conference (Holley); and content analyses looking for research reports, which found that in the second, third, and fourth ACRL conferences, one-third of the presentations were research reports (Snelson and Talar). Other published content analyses of library conferences included a paper from Denmark that studied a 30-year period of formalized interpersonal communications (meetings, conferences, seminars, symposia, and workshops) in the library world, and found, among other results, that one third of all LIS events that took place over the period studied focused on public libraries (Kajberg); and a statistical evaluation of library association conferences as a basis for judging a return on the monetary investment of attendance (Pors).

This literature review informed the current study by confirming that this kind of research is out there, and that questions about the content of conferences remain an interesting way to examine librarianship. With more focus on evidence based practice, dissemination of information is becoming an important part of the profession. It is important to discover what information is being disseminated, and who benefits from conference attendance.

Methods

Using the evidence based library and information practice framework, a research question was constructed: at provincial library association conferences, are conference sessions more heavily weighted towards public library sectors than other library

sectors? This question focused the project on collecting data based on target library sectors; however, other data were collected as well, including target library groups and session topics (domains).

Five years worth of conference programs were obtained from Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia (BC) provincial library associations. Paper copies of the programs came from Saskatchewan and British Columbia, while the Alberta programs were downloaded from the Library Association of Alberta website. The data collected for this study is from the session descriptions in the conference programs for the following years: 2002, 2003 and 2005 through 2007. Saskatchewan did not have data for 2001 available, so that year was omitted from the study. The Canadian Library Association (CLA) conference was held in BC in 2004 and the provincial conference was held in conjunction with the national conference, so that year was not included in the study. The conference in 2003 in Saskatchewan was only a day-long event with few sessions, but it was included because sessions were offered. The three most westerly provinces in Canada were chosen essentially to make this research study manageable. While the number of sessions in each conference varies by province, and even by year, it was felt that for this initial research study, five years worth of conference data from three provinces would be a sufficient start. Had Manitoba not held their conference every second year, that province would have been included, too.

The research methodology used was content analysis. Content analysis is "a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes, or biases" (Leedy and Ormrod, 155). A well-defined body of material is studied using precise definitions and descriptions of the characteristics looked for in the material. Each characteristic is coded and then tabulated, resulting in patterns, themes, or trends that are pulled out of the data.

Because conferences offer a variety of activities, the term "session" was carefully considered and defined. For the purposes of this project, the content analysis was performed on regular conference sessions, tours that were included in the regular session numbering scheme, and keynote/endnote presentations. "Sessions" did not include pre- and post-conference sessions or workshops, special or commemorative lectures, or author talks.

Data Collection

Target Sectors

The sessions were coded for the following target library sectors: public, school, academic, and special. If a sector was not specified, the target group was categorized by a careful examination of the session subject matter as described in the program description. There was also an "all" category. A designation of "all" was assigned when a specific target could not be identified from the session description. Many sessions applied to more than one target sector.

Target Groups

Each session was coded for one or more target groups: librarians, library technicians, library workers, trustees, and all. Some session descriptions did not specify to which target group the session might appeal. When coding, it was sometimes very obvious whom the session was targeting despite the lack of a specific target audience in the description. For example, a session devoted to library board governance was most likely to be of interest to library trustees. However, sessions that did not specify and that appeared broad enough to interest everyone were given the "all" designation.

Topic Domains

In order to assign topics to each session, a finite number of topics needed to be developed and defined. To build a session taxonomy, the six domains developed by Koufogiannakis, Crumley, and Slater to classify library research topics were the starting point. These domains are: collections, education, information access and retrieval, management, professional issues, and reference/inquiries. A data collection trial determined that having only six topic domains was too limiting, and that "professional issues" became a catchall for sessions that did not fit anywhere else. Based on the test data, two more domains were added: culture and programming. The topic domains used in this study are defined in Table 1.

Table 1. Topic Domains

Management	Managing people and resources within an organization. This includes marketing and promotion as well as human resources (Koufogiannakis, et al.).
Collections	Dealing with the collecting of print and electronic materials.
Reference	Pertaining to providing expert help to patrons accessing library resources
Programming	Relating to activities and events that are planned, sponsored, or carried out by library staff.
Information Access and Retrieval	Systems and methods for information retrieval and access (adapted from Koufogiannakis, et al.).
Culture	Topics pertaining to activities of cultures peripheral to librarianship, i.e. writing, literacy, multiculturalism, etc.
Education	Incorporating teaching methods and strategies to educate users about library resources and how to improve research skills (Koufogiannakis, et al.).
Professional Issues	Exploring issues that affect librarianship as a profession; includes professional competency and accreditation (Koufogiannakis, et al.).

The classification of sessions was not limited to one domain per session. If a session reflected more than one domain, then more than one was chosen.

Results

Over the five years analyzed, Saskatchewan held a total of 106 conference sessions, Alberta presented 256 sessions, and British Columbia had 189. The five year total for all three provinces is 551 conference sessions (see Table 2).

Table 2. Total Number of Sessions

Province	Total Number of Sessions
Saskatchewan	106
Alberta	256
British Columbia	189
Total	551

Sessions by Sector

Table 3. Sessions by Sector

	All	Public	Academic	School	Special
Saskatchewan	58	35	17	11	2
Alberta	121	96	25	45	3
British Columbia	108	63	24	14	2
Total	287	194	66	70	7

Choosing the library sector for each session was relatively straightforward. For many sessions this was obvious as the descriptions indicated which sector would benefit from the session. As well, some sessions dealt with topics particular to a certain library sector, or sectors. If more than one sector was specified in the session description, then more than one was chosen. When no specific sector was mentioned, the "all" category was chosen. "All" was also chosen if the topic was broad or general enough to appeal to all sectors.

Of the 551 sessions offered, 287 targeted all library sectors. Since the other sessions could be coded for more than one sector, the total number of sessions along the bottom of the table adds up to more than 551. There were 194 sessions targeted at public libraries, 66 at academic libraries, 70 at school libraries, and only 7 specifically targeted to special libraries (Table 3).

Sessions by Group

Table 4. Sessions by Group

	All	Librarians	Technicians	Workers	Trustees
Saskatchewan	53	48	29	20	9
Alberta	88	162	47	19	56
British Columbia	60	124	46	15	24
Total	201	334	122	54	89

"Librarians" refers to those with the MLIS, MLS, MiST, or other Masters degree in library science. "Library technicians" hold the diploma for this occupation. "Library workers" are library staff without specific library credentials, and "trustees" are library board members. If a specific group was mentioned in the session description, that group was chosen. If the topic was broad or general enough to include everyone (for example, the session on thriving spiritual lives in the workplace), then "all" was chosen.

One issue that arose when categorizing the sessions by occupation was that if a description mentioned "librarians" specifically, the topic more often than not could appeal to library technicians or library workers as well. Additionally, even if a group was not specifically mentioned, it was often evident what the target occupation was. For example, the session on genealogical collection development was probably more appropriate and interesting to librarians than to library trustees, unless the trustee is interested in genealogy personally. Even then, it is difficult to say.

Out of the 551 total sessions, 201 could be of interest to all groups; 334 were of particular interest to librarians; 122 were targeted to library technicians, 54 sessions targeted library workers, and 89 sessions were specifically for the trustees (Table 4).

Sessions by Domain

Table 5. Sessions by Domain

Domain	SK	AB	BC	Total
Management	24	125	49	198
Culture	35	49	47	131
IA & R	20	44	53	117
Collections	27	34	37	98
Professional Issues	25	28	34	87
Programming	17	29	29	75
Reference	7	13	17	37
Education	10	15	12	37

If a session fell under more than one domain, then more than one domain was chosen. Management was the domain with the most sessions, although that is largely due to the number of management sessions featured at the Alberta library conferences. Alberta offered 125 management sessions compared to 49 in BC and 24 in Saskatchewan. Sessions that fell under the management domains included "Handling Difficult People Situations," "Technology and Passion: A New Model for Human Resources in the

Declining Workforce," and "Going Over to the Dark Side...and Seeing the Light: Tapping Your Inner Manager."

The second most frequent domain is Culture with 131 total sessions. The Culture domain includes topics pertaining to activities of cultures peripheral to librarianship, including writing, literacy, multiculturalism, etc. Examples of sessions that fall under the Culture domain include "Literacy in Saskatchewan," "Open Door Cultural Awareness," and "Getting Organized! Conquering Paper and Information Clutter at Home and at the Office". The Information Access and Retrieval (IA & R) domain was assigned to 117 sessions, including "Digitizing in Saskatchewan and Critical Issues in its Continuing Development," "Take Back the Web--The Firefox Web Browser," and "The Role of Librarians in Canada's Health Info Structure."

Collections was next with 98 sessions, and that domain included sessions such as "Appetizers for Genealogists: Building a Basic Genealogy Collection" and "Measuring Value in Library Collection Development." Professional Issues had 87 sessions, including "Recruitment and Retention Issues for Librarianship in the Province" and "Our Enduring Values: Librarianship in the 21st Century." Library Programming garnered 97 sessions, with Reference and Education rounding out the domains with 37 sessions each (see Table 5).

Further Analysis of the Sessions by Sector

During the coding, if more than one sector was the target of the session, then more than one sector was chosen. However, there were sessions that were particular to only one sector, and these have been broken out of the data as well.

Table 6. Sector Analysis

	Saskatchewan		Alberta		British Columbia	
	<i>Shared</i>	<i>Solo</i>	<i>Shared</i>	<i>Solo</i>	<i>Shared</i>	<i>Solo</i>
Public	33%	19.8%	37.5%	27.7%	33%	24.3%
Academic	16%	5.7%	9.8%	6.3%	12.7%	7.9%
School	10.4%	1.9%	17.6%	8.6%	7.4%	0
Special	1.9%	.94%	1.2%	0	1.1%	.53%

Table 6 shows the sessions by sector in percentages, both for the shared sessions and the sessions pertaining solely to one sector. For example, in Saskatchewan, 33% of the total sessions focused on the public library, along with one or more other sectors, whereas 19.8% of the total sessions focused solely on public libraries. Looking at the data in this way brings out some interesting numbers. For example, in BC, school libraries were the focus, along with one or more other sectors, of 7.4% of the total sessions. When the school library sector was broken out to look at the number of sessions that focused solely on that sector, the result was zero. In Alberta, the total

percentage of public library sessions shared with one or more other sectors is 37.5%. The number of sessions with only a public library focus is 27.7%--a relatively high number comparatively.

Discussion

Instead of providing a definitive answer to the initial question (*At provincial library association conferences, are conference sessions more heavily weighted towards public library sectors than other library sectors?*), this study ended up generating more questions. Even the original question lacked a definitive answer because although the public library did indeed dominate the sessions when individual sectors were looked at, the "all" category was larger than any one sector across the board. Why, when there are so many sessions that do not specify any one sector in particular (or specify them all), is there the perception that provincial association conferences are public library-heavy?

It could be because of session descriptions. When reading the program, people will notice target sectors that are explicitly mentioned, but may not process the fact that many sessions do not indicate a specific target sector. If this is the case, it brings up a point that provincial library association conference planners may want to look at more closely: the conference program is all the attendees have to go on when deciding which sessions to attend at a conference, or even whether to attend a conference at all. The session descriptions affect participants' perceptions of what is actually offered at any given conference. In order to dispel unwarranted perceptions, perhaps longer descriptions could be elicited from conference presenters. Using a structured abstract would be helpful in conveying exactly what the session is about and who it is for.

Aside from the sessions targeting "All" sectors, there are more public library sessions than there are sessions targeted to other sectors. Is this merely a numbers game? Are there more public librarians, technicians, workers, and trustees in the provinces, so therefore there are more sessions for and by them? Does the session breakdown of this study match the proportionate number of the various libraries in the library sectors in each province? Or does it match the number of attendees from each sector? These questions were not examined in the initial study, but would be an informative continuation of the research.

The discussion thus far has been from the perspective of the end point: the conference itself. But there is also the process by which conference sessions are chosen that may influence the outcomes. There are a number of factors that could influence the selection of sessions:

- Composition of the program committee: it is not inconceivable that if a certain year is heavy on a certain topic that the makeup and agenda of the program committee could possibly come into play. Of course, conferences usually have themes, which will also influence sessions.
- The number of session proposals submitted: if there are 30 session slots and 30 acceptable submissions, there is not a lot to be done. The committee could look

around for other submissions, but would it be fair to turn away those voluntarily submitted?

- Who is submitting the proposals: if the public library sector is proportionately higher, staff-wise, than other sectors, there could be more session proposals for and/or by the public library sector. This notion could result in an infinite loop, as there could be a supply and demand circle. Additionally, academic librarians could be submitting their presentations to conferences that are tailored solely to their particular sector, or within their sub-specialty. The same could be said for school and special librarians as well.

Limitations of this study: At times during the content analysis coding, the assignment of various categories felt arbitrary and subjective. There were several reasons for this:

- Some session descriptions were not that descriptive. The descriptions were relatively short in many cases.
- There are no clear demarcations between the work of librarians, library technicians, and library workers in many situations.
- The context of a particular session might not be the researcher's own context.

This study would have been strengthened by having two or three investigators analyzing the sessions separately using the given criteria and the developed taxonomy, with a comparison of the results for the final analyses. If there were discrepancies, the investigators would look at the sessions together and attempt to reach a consensus. The researcher was aware of these limitations and was careful to undertake the content analysis as objectively as possible, while acknowledging that total objectivity is not possible. In terms of the domains, the researcher kept to the definitions that were outlined in the taxonomy. Additionally, the population sample was comprised of the three most westerly provinces in Canada. Given their close proximity to one another, it could be the case that had a province or territory from Central Canada, the North, or the Maritimes been included, results may have been different.

Conclusion

Of the 551 total sessions offered over 5 years by the three provinces, 287 were of interest to all library sectors, 194 focused (either solely or shared with another sector) on Public libraries, 66 sessions were for Academic libraries (solely or shared), 70 sessions had a school library focus (alone or shared), and seven sessions had a special library focus (solely, or shared with another sector). While public library sessions did indeed dominate the conference sessions when individual sectors were examined, sessions appropriate for every library sector outnumbered everything else. Thus, what was heard anecdotally about the content of a particular provincial conference has some basis in numbers.

Limiting the analysis to the conference brochures reflects how important the conference programs are as an information source and as a promotional tool. Closer attention paid to the conference programs by the provincial conference committees might be

considered as they are the face of the conference and are all people have when deciding not only what to attend at the conference, but also, whether to attend at all. Perhaps more thought should be given to the target audience and more care should be taken to make that information easy to see and find.

These results could serve to encourage wider participation in provincial conferences. Of course, there are many library conferences, and many are quite specialized. It is possible that people are presenting at conferences that are more suited to their specific needs and interests. Provincial conferences by their nature tend to be broader in scope.

This study could also remind program committees to be aware not only of the perception, but also of the actual numbers when they are planning who they might target to present. They could be more aware that balance can be an issue that needs to be considered more closely.

Future research: This study generated more questions and ideas for future research. It could be expanded to encompass the rest of Canada. The mandates of provincial professional library associations could be explored to see if what they espouse matches what they offer in terms of conferences. The results of this study could be combined with an analysis of the proportion of library sectors provincially. The number of librarians, library technicians, library staff, and library trustees present in the provinces could be combined with the current research to determine if there is any correlation between those numbers and the sessions targeted to particular groups. Additionally a qualitative analysis of provincial association program committees and the criteria used to choose sessions could be undertaken.

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